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United States
Department of
Agriculture

USDA Working Group on Water Quality

Progress Update #1, February 12, 1990

About This Letter

From time to time, USDA's newly formed Working Group on Water Quality will issue brief progress updates to executives in the Department. All updates will be presented on this letterhead.

The Working Group on Water Quality is one of six such teams already assembled in the Department, all reporting directly to deputy secretary Parnell under the authority of the Secretary's Policy Coordination Council. The others: Climate Change;

Food Safety/Pesticide Legislation; Food Safety Data Initiative; Commercialization of Industrial Agricultural Products; and Rural Development.

The importance of water quality has been underscored by the President's Water Quality Initiative, which defines a vigorous effort to protect ground and surface water from potential contamination from agricultural chemicals and wastes, especially pesticides and nutrients.

About the Working Group

The Working Group on Water Quality is chaired by Dr. Harry C. Mussman, deputy assistant secretary for Science and Education. It is made up of the appropriate under and assistant secretaries and representatives of the following agencies:

- Agricultural Research Service;
- Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service;
- Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service;
- Cooperative State Research Service;
- Economic Research Service;
- Extension Service;

- Farmers Home Administration;
- Forest Service;
- National Agricultural Library;
- National Agricultural Statistics Service;
- Soil Conservation Service.

The working group will also work closely with three other federal agencies—the Environmental Protection Agency; the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce; and the U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Department of the Interior—to coordinate overall federal water quality policy.

The Objectives of the Working Group

The working group first met on December 7 and reviewed its objectives:

- To review, and revise if necessary, USDA's existing policy on water quality;
- To ensure coordinated Departmental action;

- To coordinate USDA's water quality work with that of other federal agencies;
- To inform the public regularly of USDA's progress and initiatives in water quality.

USDA Water Quality Policy

One subgroup of the working group, chaired by Vivan Jennings of the Extension Service, is now analyzing USDA's current water quality policies with an eye toward updating

them to meet current needs. The subgroup's forthcoming recommendations will ensure that USDA maintains a high profile and a leadership position on this issue.

Committee Structure

A second subgroup, chaired by Wilson Scaling of SCS, recommended the formation of three separate committees:

- Education and Technical Assistance Committee, co-chaired by ES and SCS;
- Research Committee, co-chaired by ARS and CSRS;
- Data Base and Evaluation Committee, co-chaired by ERS and NASS.

An executive committee will advise the group on policy, program direction, and legislative strategies. An interagency committee will coordinate the group's activities with other federal, state, and local agencies, interest groups, and the public. A public affairs issue management team will develop and carry out a strategy for a water quality public information effort under the guidance of the working group.

Reciprocal Meetings With USGS

On December 19, policy officials from the U.S. Geological Survey came to the South Building to brief the working group on USGS programs. On January 25, Dr. Mussman and others from the working

group briefed USGS on their turf. What became clear from these meetings is that in demonstration projects and at hydrologic sites, there are many opportunities for joint projects in collaboration with USGS.

H.R. 3574

Rep. Fred Grandy of Iowa has introduced H.R. 3574, a groundwater infrastructure bill that would establish an independent director of groundwater policy and coordination within USDA. The bill's intent is to institutionalize and coordinate USDA's groundwater activities and to make USDA more aggressive in dealing with groundwater concerns and problems.

Staffers from Rep. Grandy's office attended a recent meeting of the working group to explain the intent and provisions of the bill. The Department will continue working with Rep. Grandy and his staff to further improve on water quality alternatives within the Department.

EPA Well Water Survey

EPA has recently completed fieldwork for a nationwide survey of pesticide and nitrate contamination of rural wells and is currently analyzing data from the survey. This survey

could be a good starting point in zeroing in on specific problem areas for well water contamination.



Harry C. Mussman
Chairman, USDA Working Group
on Water Quality

If you have questions or comments, please contact Jim Benson, Agricultural Research Service, Beltsville, MD; telephone 344-4504. This update may be photocopied.